

HURRICANE RITA UPDATE FOR RELEASE: September 29, 2005

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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE EMPLOYEES CLEAR EMERGENCY ROUTES AND ASSIST LAW ENFORCEMENT IN RITA'S WAKE

A team of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employees is assisting Hurricane Rita recovery efforts in Southeast Texas. Team members are supporting local communities in the Hurricane-damaged areas of Liberty, Chambers, and Jefferson counties.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) employees from eight western states arrived in Chambers County on Saturday. The Service is contributing saw teams and heavy equipment to reestablish emergency vehicle access to state, county and local roadways. Crews have been working in record heat to clear downed trees and debris. The group is collaborating with Emergency Operations Centers and other county officials to determine priority areas and complete work projects.

Law enforcement agents with the Service team are supporting needs in local counties by helping the Texas Department of Public Safety at fuel stations and supplementing Chambers County Sheriff officer patrols. Officers will assist the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office with increasing security needs.

The 70-person team has also been working to establish emergency access to Trinity River, Anahuac, and McFaddin National Wildlife Refuges, and to stabilize facilities against further deterioration.

"Clearing roads for emergency access is a vital need," said team member Carl Schwope, a Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge fire management officer. "But yesterday we were able to assist a blind gentleman who was seeking out water and get him to a relief shelter. Those are the kind of activities that rejuvenate our tired crews."

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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE EMPLOYEES FROM NEW MEXICO ASSIST IN HURRICANE RITA RECOVERY EFFORTS

Fire, law enforcement and support crews from San Andres National Wildlife Refuge and the Fish and Wildlife Service's Southwest Regional Office in Albuquerque were dispatched to east Texas to restore emergency vehicle access and provide assistance in communities damaged by Hurricane Rita.

Crews are operating chainsaws and front-end loaders/dozers to clear fallen trees and debris from roads in record-setting heat and humidity. The team has restored emergency access to four southeast Texas wildlife refuges and has cleared all emergency access routes in middle Chambers County and dozens of miles of additional road. They have assessed refuge damages, stabilized buildings, roads and other facilities to prevent further deterioration and set up generators to restore power.

The New Mexicans are part of a 70-member team of Fish and Wildlife Service relief workers that assembled at Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge near Austin the day before Rita's landfall. The team moved into Chambers County on Sunday and established a command center in Baytown.

Twenty-three Service law enforcement agents are part of the team. They have been locally deputized and are providing security for the relief team and are assisting local and state law enforcement agencies with patrols, investigations and guarding fuel and food distribution centers.

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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE EMPLOYEES FROM OKLAHOMA ASSIST IN HURRICANE RITA RECOVERY EFFORTS

Fire, law enforcement and support crews from Wichita Mountains, Little River, Tishomingo and Sequoyah national wildlife refuges were dispatched to east Texas to restore emergency vehicle access and provide assistance in communities damaged by Hurricane Rita.

Crews are operating chainsaws and front-end loaders/dozers to clear fallen trees and debris from roads in record-setting heat and humidity. The team has restored emergency access to four southeast Texas wildlife refuges and has cleared all emergency access routes in middle Chambers county and dozens of miles of additional road. They have assessed refuge damages, stabilized buildings, roads and other facilities to prevent further deterioration and set up generators to restore power.

Wichita Mountains National Wildlife Refuge fire management officer, Ralph Godfrey, is the team's incident commander. "There is no way to explain how much help folks need after something like this," said Godfrey. "We are glad to be part of getting these areas back to normal."

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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE EMPLOYEES FROM ACROSS TEXAS ASSIST IN HURRICANE RITA RECOVERY EFFORTS

Fire, maintenance and law enforcement crews from Balcones Canyonlands, Aransas, San Bernard, Hagerman, and Lower Rio Grande Valley national wildlife refuges were dispatched to east Texas to restore emergency vehicle access and provide assistance in communities damaged by Hurricane Rita.

Crews are operating chainsaws and front-end loaders/dozers to clear fallen trees and debris from roads in record-setting heat and humidity. The team has restored emergency access to four southeast Texas wildlife refuges and has cleared all emergency access routes in middle Chambers County and dozens of miles of additional road. They have assessed refuge damages, stabilized buildings, roads and other facilities to prevent further deterioration and set up generators to restore power.

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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE EMPLOYEES FROM ARIZONA ASSIST IN HURRICANE RITA RECOVERY EFFORTS

Fire, maintenance and law enforcement crews from Buenos Aires, Cabeza Prieta, Bill Williams River, and Havasu national wildlife refuges and the Phoenix Ecological Services Office were dispatched to east Texas to restore emergency vehicle access and provide assistance in communities damaged by Hurricane Rita.

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Bill Williams River National Wildlife Refuge (Parker, Arizona) manager Dick Gilbert, the team’s liaison with local communities, has been coordinating mission assignments with local leaders. Gilbert said, “Chambers County officials opened their facilities to us as a base of operations. From here, we’ve sent work crews further east into the heart of the damaged area. Chambers County officials facilitated our success here.”

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